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www.nme-educators.org

September 29, 2005

To: Michael Flanagan, Superintendent of Public Instruction

From: Ask the Network Action Team
Dave Borth, Nancy Flanagan, Frank Miracola

Subject: Summary Report on Dialogue and Survey of the Network
A Mandatory Curriculum for Michigan Schools

Response requested by	Michael Flanagan, Superintendent of Public Instruction
Policy Statement Subject	A Mandatory Curriculum for Michigan Schools
Survey Date(s)	September 25 – 27, 2005
Group polled	Available Network Email Addresses
Number responding	87

Statement:

Following a conversation with Superintendent Flanagan, The Network Steering Committee assigned the “Ask The Network” Action Team to initiate an online discussion of the mandatory curriculum for Michigan high schools. This discussion was held from 8/25/05 through 9/20/05. A survey was then developed from the online conversation and launched on 9/25/05. Team members acted as discussion moderator, survey developer, survey initiator, data collector, summary writer, report creator, and editors of each other’s work. If you want to view the full text of the online threaded discussion it can be found at www.hlcbr.org under NME Discussion Board.

Network Response

A summary report of the online discussion and survey results follows on the next pages.

Who/What is The Network of Michigan Educators?

The **Network** represents a broad diversity of recognized educators who have been recognized through the rigorous standards of eleven state level recognition programs. Complete information about the Network can be found at: <http://nme-educators.org>.



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Network of Michigan Educators

Summary Report on Dialogue and Survey of the Network: A Mandatory Curriculum for Michigan Schools

The Network of Michigan Educators would like to sincerely thank Superintendent Michael Flanagan for the opportunity to share their perspectives, as accomplished practitioners, on this critical issue. When policy leaders gather input and insight from those ultimately responsible for implementing these requirements, there is a greater likelihood that good decisions will be made, and the system of public education in Michigan strengthened. We appreciate the chance to be heard.

Methodology: All members of the Network of Michigan Educators were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in an on-line threaded dialogue around 3 questions:

- What are the key competencies that all students need to make a HS diploma a meaningful benchmark?
- What required coursework would lead all students to achieving that benchmark?
- What factors must policymakers keep in mind as they construct a set of curricular requirements?

About two dozen teachers participated in the on-line conversation. Discussion was wide-ranging and thoughtful. A brief synopsis of the dialogue:

- **Key competencies** should include affective skills (work ethic, curiosity, confidence) as well as broad curricular goals. The goal mentioned most often was strong communication skills, but the theme of developing students for the global world of the future was woven into every response. NME members strongly endorsed a focus on critical thinking, creativity, environmental awareness, practical and career-based skills, understanding global interdependence and what one teacher called “cross-training the brain”—sending students out with a toolbox full of diverse skills, rather than limiting them to single occupational path.
- **Required coursework** was a subject for speculation. Several teachers noted that one size does not fit all students, and flexibility was a virtue in working with diverse populations, although not one teacher felt that students should not have the option of choosing rigorous coursework. Several teachers mentioned their own district requirements as useful; others were leery of a state-mandated set of requirements overlaid on their own, especially if those requirements were not subject to change over time, given the rapidly changing workplace and global business model.

A handful of the teachers suggested some broad course minimums (generally, about 3 years of each of the four core areas), but there was no consistent response.

One teacher proposed that each student be required to take 6 courses in each of three disciplines—Communications, Math-Science, Humanities—leaving room in the last two years of high school for courses supporting their choice for future plans.

- Teachers who responded felt that **policymakers should know** that most schools have wrestled with the subject of course requirements and developed appropriate plans. New curricular requirements may alter and adjust existing programs that have served students well—a caution for policymakers. Questions were raised about alternative schedules (e.g. block scheduling plans) and how they would fit with a set of requirements built on a particular scheduling model. They also considered the possibility of the middle school as a partner in meeting mandatory goals.

The threaded dialogue is available on-line at: www.hlcbr.org (click on *NME Discussion*)

SURVEY CREATION AND RESULTS

From the topics and themes raised in the on-line dialogue, NME leaders created a 7-question survey, with two further opportunities for members who responded to post comments. As of September 28, a total of 87 accomplished educators have responded to the survey, and most of them posted additional comments. Both the survey and comments are attached to the report. Findings are described below.

About three-quarters of teachers surveyed agree that Michigan would be well-served by a mandatory high school curriculum. This finding is interesting, given the reservations of teachers who participated in the on-line dialogue. Although teachers are cautious, they believe that Michigan students can held to—and reach—high standards. The teachers who disagreed (about 20%) were concerned about “cookie-cutter” requirements that did not take students’ individual needs into account. There was also consternation about loss of local control.

A large and enthusiastic majority (81%) of teachers surveyed felt that a core curriculum should focus on outcomes—what students should know and be able to do—rather than a list of required courses. Only 12% of surveyed teachers felt that a list of required classes would be more useful. This finding aligns with the on-line conversations around desired core competencies of communication, critical thinking, global connections and a broad and practical skill base.






The next pair of questions asked teachers to consider two basic models of curriculum construction—a minimal or basic curriculum required for “success in life” or a “rigorous, extensive list of required classes to prepare all students for higher education”. Teachers were **almost evenly divided (39% vs. 40%) on the question of basic requirements**, but showed their **discomfort with a rigorous, college-bound requirement model for all students by a 51% to 30% margin.** A significant number of teachers opted not to choose either model, and their comments reflect their uneasiness about the concept of a college education being right for all kids. Their arguments against a college-for-all mainline strategy are divergent and interesting to read.

The comments from this pair of questions were very rich. Many teachers listed curricular areas and courses they felt are needed but overlooked. A majority of the comments stressed outcomes—teaching for understanding, teaching for workplace skills, teaching for literacy—as opposed to courses designed to prepare students solely for college admission. Some of these comments had an edge of frustration, even anger. This is clearly a subject that schools and individual educators have considered before, and teachers felt that they were in the best position to decide what courses would benefit their own students.






Not one of the comments pointed to softer or easier standards. Teachers were not impressed with soft language like “success in life.” The surveyed teachers want rigorous, useful curriculum; they simply feel they understand their students’ needs and are anxious about one-size course requirements that may do more harm than good. They suggested looking at broad competencies—like communications—and letting students select appropriate courses to meet those competencies, rather than providing a defined list of requirements.






There was strong agreement (80%) with the idea of bringing practitioners into the policy-making process on this important issue. Only 14% of survey educators felt that it was someone else’s job to construct curriculum requirements.






Ask the Network Survey Results – Mandated High School Curriculum

1. Agree or Disagree - The State should have a mandated High School curriculum?		Number of Responses	Response Ratio
Strongly Agree		25	29%
Agree		39	45%
Neutral		6	7%
Disagree		9	10%
Strongly Disagree		8	9%
Total		87	100%






2.	Comments related to your answer of number one.	
VIEW 59 Responses		

3. Agree or Disagree - a mandatory statewide core curriculum should focus on outcomes, what students should know and be able to do, rather than a list of classes they should take.		Number of Responses	Response Ratio
Strongly Agree		42	48%
Agree		29	33%
Neutral		6	7%
Disagree		6	7%
Strongly Disagree		4	5%
Total		87	100%

4. Agree or Disagree - If a list of required classes is adopted it should contain only those basic classes required for success in life.		Number of Responses	Response Ratio
Strongly Agree		10	11%
Agree		24	28%
Neutral		18	21%
Disagree		25	29%
Strongly Disagree		10	11%

5.	Agree or Disagree - If a list of required classes is adopted it should be rigorous, extensive, and prepare all students for higher education.	Number of Responses	Response Ratio
	Strongly Agree 	3	3%
	Agree 	25	29%
	Neutral 	14	16%
	Disagree 	37	43%
	Strongly Disagree 	8	9%

6.	Related to questions 4 and 5 what classes would you want on the list and why.	
	VIEW 59 Responses	

7.	Agree or disagree - development of a statewide mandatory core curriculum should be a collaboration between the Department of Education, The Governor's office, the Legislature, and educators in the field.	Number of Responses	Response Ratio
	Strongly Agree 	54	63%
	Agree 	15	17%
	Neutral 	5	6%
	Disagree 	6	7%
	Strongly Disagree 	6	7%

Comments Related to Question One.

Agree or Disagree - The State should have a mandated High School curriculum?

- 1 There should be a minimum uniform expectation of what kids should know and be able to do.
- 2 There needs to be something in place that takes into consideration all the special needs students as well as those not college bound.
- 3 Michigan is one of two states that have not yet mandated high school curriculum. All high schools seem to have different standards and requirements.
- 4 A mandated curriculum would cause a universal elevation of high school standards.
- 5 Different areas of the state may need to educate their population to prepare for different things
- 6 Set standards that everyone will work towards. With local control, there are too many variables that make comparisons too difficult.
- 7 As a state, we should be able to say all our citizens have had an opportunity to learn about topics important for their future. The future of our state is at stake, and businesses should be able to plan on well-educated citizens for the workforce.
- 8 Our youth should not be held to cookie-cutter, one size fits all standards, or to a single curriculum. In a truly democratic society, our schools should honor and value the diversity of talents and skills that our youth bring to them. I don't believe that we can prescribe a certain number of units of particular courses and still serve the varying aspirations of our high schoolers.
- 9 I feel that there should be some standards; however on another level, I feel also pretty strongly about local control. I would hate to see a "prescribed" curriculum that is unresponsive to the needs of unique communities. If that's what's meant by a mandated HS curriculum that's not what I'm interested in. I WOULD like to see the state mandate a certain number of years of English, SS, Science, and Math. This is already done for most college bound seniors, but kids who don't see themselves as "college bound" are sometimes shortchanged, I think.

- 10 Most districts already have requirements in place for graduation that are aligned with college requirements. Wouldn't creating a mandated curriculum simply require adapting what is already in place?
- 11 Curriculum is not a political matter. If the legislature gets involved in deciding all of what high school students need to know the decisions will not contribute to the education in a positive way.
- 12 Special accommodations should be made for students with special needs. There must be flexibility for individual needs.
- 13 In our global economy having a mandated curriculum has become a necessity. It says to those outside our state that our students and potential employees have achieved a certain minimum requirement. However, having students endure certain required classes does not mean that they have learned valuable skills. Having a meaningful, relevant, and applicable curriculum is more important than simply stating a required course of study.
- 14 Education no longer allows the qualified educator to structure an appropriate curriculum around the diverse students they teach. As educators we need we need choices not restrictions.
- 15 This would raise the standard in Michigan. It would one step closer to equity in education.
- 16 One reservation I have about a mandated curriculum is that it should promote higher-level thinking for students, include authentic performances that apply knowledge - rather than being assessed via objective tests.
- 17 All schools should be on the same page so people can expect certain minimal standards when they see a Michigan High School graduate.
- 18 I believe that there needs to be a framework of minimum competencies.
- 19 There should be a set of minimum requirements for high school graduation regarding students, competence in the academic areas
- 20 Local needs and abilities will be taxed by unfunded mandates that will be the unintended reality of a state curriculum
- 21 State as political entity does not have the experience (term limits) nor the background to take on the task
- 22 We need consistency throughout the state. Our requirements need to reflect the highest standards.
- 23 Many schools already have a rigorous set of requirements and will be challenged by an overlaying set of state requirements. The fact that MI is one of only two states that don't have a state-mandated curriculum probably indicates that Michigan should put its goals for HS graduates on record.
- 24 Mandated curriculums in other times and states have only included "the Core" what a waste. All students are not going on to a four year college. Will the new curriculum include mandated career and technical education?
- 25 This initiative would ensure standards around the state for graduating high school students, they must have the required classes to pursue higher education if desired.
- 26 There are too many local districts that put too many resources into sports programs at the expense of academics. A state mandated curriculum might help alleviate some of this problem.
- 27 Each region of the state has "unique needs" which need to be met. University admissions currently drive students/parents to select the core curriculum essential for their future career pursuit.
- 28 Because of the pressure on the State for students to perform well on standardized tests, it will be tough for the state to get a handle on differences between districts if there is no statewide standard.
- 29 As long as it includes room for electives!
- 30 A few guidelines, perhaps, but nothing too strict.
- 31 It needs mandated curriculum that is prepared by educators not politicians, which takes into account the differences between those schools that have and those who are the "have nots"
- 32 The state should have a state endorsed curriculum and assessment for specific courses (i.e) Algebra I. Students could then work towards receiving a state endorsed diploma. This diploma would have 10- 12 specific courses that a student would have to take and pass the assessment.
- 33 Consistency in expectations across the State will help all students when moving from one school to another as well as preparation for higher learning.
- 34 Depending on what is mandated --goal of the curriculum shouldn't be to assuage colleges
- 35 There should be consistency throughout the state while still having opportunities to offer many courses.
- 36 As with No Child Left Behind. Please fund anything you mandate.
- 37 But how to help students who are not doing well. Money to make curr. work comes from where?
- 38 We need some type of standardization, more than what currently exists.
- 39 A basic core
- 40 Most districts currently have a well developed curriculum. Looking at our current requirements from "outside" makes the state of Michigan look very poor in terms of educational rigor.
- 41 A mandated framework if it is forward-thinking . . . not the same factory model, pigeon-hole 19th century high school of the past. Let's be the leaders and take this opportunity to reform the way we do school.
- 42 It would be good for the state to have a set of basic standards that any graduate from a Michigan High School can be counted on to have passed.
- 43 The state should begin with what a graduating student should know, be able to do, and what are the essential skills necessary to live in the 21 st century. This should be done before a curriculum is developed.
- 44 Standards, yes. Curriculum, no. We need to get back to more local control as public schools were designed for.
- 45 I am unaware of the issues related to this as I am an elementary school teacher
- 46 It is important to have standards to measure the accountability of schools.
- 47 Depends on who is involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the curriculum. Minimum standards can be expected - but curriculum and how you deliver the standards need to be contextually relevant.

- 48 There should be clear and consistent expectations for high school graduates.
- 49 The standard for high school should be uniform. A high school graduate should be well qualified to go to college
- 50 We need a curriculum that is taught statewide so that there is a level playing field for every kid in all districts - a curriculum that will get every child ready for the 21st century. The curriculum should not be watered down, but should include courses in chemistry, physics, microbiology, 4 years of foreign language, geometry, trigonometry, calculus, writing, literature (including English and World Literatures), computer literacy, government and current events.
- 51 We are creating a generation of non-thinkers with this scripted approach to education.
- 52 Classroom teachers must be involved in the development and policy makers need to look up the definition of "rigorous"

Comments Related to Questions 4 and 5.

4. Agree or Disagree - If a list of required classes is adopted it should contain only those basic classes required for success in life.

5. Agree or Disagree - If a list of required classes is adopted it should be rigorous, extensive, and prepare all students for higher education.

- 1 Demonstrated competency in 5 areas - Communication skills, people skills, Mathematics (through advanced algebra), Science (life and physical minimum), and civics (American history, government, current world history)
- 2 US History (to know where we came from and where we are going) Basic Grammar and writing skills (something students need to communicate no matter the job) Basic math
- 3 more environmental science courses so students will be able to make wise decisions about environmental issues at election time. more courses that are meaningful to students and get them into the community as interns and apprentices, or job shadowing opportunities. Throw out the P.E. requirement and work toward fitness for life/wellness/healthy choices, one semester of P.E. hardly makes anyone "fit". Global studies because we need to understand other cultures and know what is going on in the world from many perspectives. English courses that really help students become better writers. That's just a few of the things on my wish list.
- 4 Algebra/Trigonometry (at least 3 years): Statistics that correlate this to life after high school. English (Literature & Composition, including American Literature) (at least 4 years): Having a strong writing requirement along with literature studies (preferably in an integrated approach) would help students master the types of writing required for college, the world of work, and life. Phys Ed (with focus on lifelong fitness, healthy choices, etc. instead of sports-related skills) (at least 1 year): to help curb the epidemic of obesity and other diseases. Science (at least 2 years) including Biology and Chemistry. Social Studies (at least 2 years) including Government, Civics/Economics, and U.S. History. LifeSkills where students could learn basic things required to function in life, including conflict management/resolution, personal finance, etc. Fine Arts (at least 1 semester) of either visual, dramatic, graphic, musical, etc. arts.
- 5 all students do not need to go to college a huge proportion of existing jobs are service level and a high school education is sufficient
- 6 Core academic classes IF the goal is to get more students to go to college; life-oriented classes IF the goal is to have more students become successful citizens in the community and at work and home.
- 7 #4 - Defining "success in life" will need more study. Success in whose life??? #5 - If higher education includes the "trades" and jobs that require "people skills" but not necessarily 4 years of college, then I can agree with the premise in #5. We will always need good plumbers, electricians, carpenters, salespeople, etc. and you don't need a college degree to perform those tasks. Continued training of some sort would be needed.
- 8 I don't want a prescribed set of classes, nor do I necessarily see the target as preparing students for higher education. While I think that we should let students know that we have great confidence in their ability to achieve, we need to be prepared to diversify the ways in which that is accomplished. Some students learn through apprenticeships, some through more scholarly pursuits. Neither is better than the other. It is only when we marginalize children by disparately valuing their chosen paths that we place children at risk of losing their purposes.
- 9 I strongly believe economics should extend beyond theory into personal practice. The level of debt in our society is shocking. Basic understanding of managing debt and credit is really relevant and important today in a way that it wasn't 50 years ago.
- 10 Language Arts classes, communication classes, writing development. These are necessary for success in all fields Technology classes once again required for entry level placement in most careers Mathematics, Social Sciences
- 11 Naturally it should be rigorous but the idea of one curriculum preparing all students for success in life is impossible. There are soem basic needs but the individual child should dictate educational needs.
- 12 Communications and Logic (in the 19th and 20th centuries these may have been labeled English and Mathematics). Students in all jobs and walks of life need to communicate and complete tasks with logical abilities. Not all students require higher education, but these people and their jobs are still valuable to the rest of us. When I need a good electrician, a plumber, or a painter, I want someone who can communicate and complete a task logically.
- 13 English - American, Grammar, Traditional Texts History - American, World, Global Studies Math - Algebra - Pre-Calc Science - Basic Biology - Chemistry
- 14 4 requirements in English, Social Studies, Science, and Mathematics
- 15 Math, Science, Language Arts, Social Studies.
- 16 There has to options for district control. The core has to be flexible enough for that to happen. However, it could have two cores. One for college prep and another for career prep.
- 17 If requirements are simply basic, they will mean as much as what we have now. If we want the curriculum to mean something, and not be a farce, it needs to have some meat. If you want, give out BASIC diploma and a Diploma of Rigor...let students decide.

- 18 I would like to see a history of world civilizations class so that graduates would have a better understanding of how other people think. I think we do our kids a disservice by allowing them to operate in an "Americo-centric" frame of mind. I would like also to see an ecological type of science class that would be a combination of chemistry/earth/biology where kids could learn of our dependence on the environment and how our activities affect not only the environment, but in turn our own quality of life. Of course there are no teachers qualified to teach such a class with NCLB. I don't know if there is a field to respond to question 7, so I'll comment here. I'm disturbed that educators are listed last. They should be consulted first and foremost.
- 19 Science, math, literacy skills and humanities. We need to clarify what we mean by success in life. Thoughtful and contributing members of society would be a better goal.
- 20 World Cultures Political Systems Ethics
- 21 Environmental Stewardship Ethics Cooking
- 22 I think rigorous classes should be required of all students whether they choose the path of higher education. Classes should also include basic, life skills requirements. Students need to know how to balance a checkbook and compute interest and complete tax forms.
- 23 A balance of coursework in Communications, Humanities, Math and Science, with the opportunity for every student, after the first two years of HS, to fine-tune personal choices to accommodate special interests and talents. While all students should be encouraged to pursue post-secondary education, that will look very different from student to student. A too-prescriptive set of requirements will make it difficult for students to individualize their educational choices and might have unintended consequences (loss of programs that are giving kids concrete skills, a higher dropout rate, pushing kids into courses of study that do not interest them, etc.)
- 24 Who decides what classes are "basic for success in life"? Who wrote the definition for success? Has anyone looked at statistics concerning the number of Michigan high school graduates who complete a four year program in college? Who speaks for the kid who is going to go to a technical school, a community college, or on to work? Are they not as important as the kid who goes to a university? How does the average kid afford a university?
- 25 All student will not go to college, so therefore those student should have the option of a separate curriculum preparing them for their lifes endeavors.
- 26 Four years of English composition, four years of literature, four years of mathematics including trigonometry, five courses in science including: Earth, Biology, Chemistry, Physics and a fifth elective.
- 27 Discussion point from #5 - NOT ALL MI students need higher education to prepare for their careers. Many careers take alternative pathways beyond HS years.
- 28 Algebra I, Geometry and Algebra II because of the data that indicates that Algebra II is a gateway class. Biology, Chemistry and Physics (offered at various levels) to provide a base for students as they enter college. 4 years of English (focused on writing) and 3 years of Social Studies. If these are not required, students will take watered down classes and "blow-off" classes. I think all "blow-off" type classes should be eliminated, so students can have choices their senior year, but that all of the choices are meaningful.
- 29 Higher ed AND careers should be the focus...not all students will go on to college.
- 30 Not every child is geared for or is planning on going on to higher education. I wonder if this would all but eliminate vocational education.
- 31 A state list of required classes will not work. If the state is looking for minimum skills then they should have a gatekeeper exam in reading and math for high school graduation.
- 32 I believe that basic expectations for learning in content areas should be clarified for each grade. Outcomes for higher level classes should also be specified. Although I believe that we should have high expectations for all students, I do not think that forcing all students in to college prep is fair or realistic.
- 33 Classes shouldn't be listed, performances should be. Content is often loss days after the class ends. We should pay attention to the research that we don't like to hear
- 34 High Order Math, Science, Social Studies, and Writing.
- 35 Teach students skills.
- 36 Not all students will be headed to higher education, and the curriculum should reflect that without watering down college-prep classes
- 37 Not all students should go to college. Listing courses does not make the class difficult.
- 38 math, reading, English, Government, science, life skills
- 39 Higher education is more than just college. We need to prepare students to attend a form of higher education - skills training, community college.
- 40 MAth through Algebra. several years of English/writing.....Constitution/law basics...
- 41 What we need is more nuanced than choice 4 or choice 5. The strengths of students and their goals require a more user-oriented system or public schools will not be serving the public in the very near future. I believe the suggestions from Nancy Flanagan as provided on the NME discussion board would be a terrific starting point, as would the "Breaking Ranks" reports from NASSP. Hopefully the NME will be able to provide support for the process!!
- 42 I would really like to see some history, math, science, social studies, literature/writing requirements but also a critical thinking piece. Our citizens should be able to do some higher level thinking and this would enable them to be more successful no matter where they go in life.
- 43 We need to first develop the outcomes before the courses are selected.
- 44 Writing, Political processes, Integrated Math,
- 45 Algebra because it is the foundation for higher level mathematics courses.
- 46 Not all students consider 'higher education.' Statistical information shows quite the opposite. We should be educating 'all students' for UNDERSTANDING. That includes knowing individual learning styles and feeling comfortable learning in that style, as well as, developing healthy affective goals and objectives.
- 47 Math,Science,English ang social studies. These are the core classes that should prepare students for higher education.
- 48 4 years of all core classes eg.math, science, social studies, ELA and choice of electives in the arts, sports and humanities. Additionally courses should reflect a systematic relationship with the career pathways. All students may not go to college but all students will need a job in the future. Foreign language should also be a requirement because we live in an ethnically diverse world and communication is important. Courses could vary within content and requirements but all students need exposure to all of the core competencies for the full four years in high school.